

# Hebrews

Series 1

## Lesson 1

### “Introduction to Hebrews”

**Objective:** To explore the ancient text of Hebrews in order to understand how this product of the mature early Christian movement interpreted Christological understandings. In doing this it is the aim of this study to encourage, enable and inspire people to live a more Christ-centered existence.

**Materials:** The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate.

#### Procedures

1. To explore this text first as it would have been understood by its original audience, in its original context.
2. Next we will hope to understand more fully the nature of our God and in so doing comprehend his call upon our existence in order to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers.
3. We will seek to find practical guidance in these ancient words that will empower, enlighten and inspire us as we live in a twenty-first century world dominated by a focus on self and the individual. We are called as God's people to live in community as a people that unleashes His compassion in a world filled with pain and suffering. God is the only hope for a better world.
4. Provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of God's word and application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now.

Despite the fact that the Epistle to the Hebrews is included (by the early church) among the writings of Paul in the earliest attested form that we have (P<sup>46</sup>) scholars are all but certain that it is not a work of Paul. Papyrus 46 (in the Gregory-Aland system of numbering) is one of the oldest extant New Manuscripts in existence in Greek, dating from sometime between A.D. 175 and 225. Some leaves of this manuscript are a part of the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri that are housed in Dublin, Ireland while others are housed at the University of Michigan and a few other locations. This manuscript was first obtained by illegal dealers of antiquities and so its provenance is unknown. The papyri were first announced on November 19th, 1931. The fact is we have no degree of certainty as to the author of this epistle. The proposals that have been forward are numerous and varied from Aquila, or Priscilla to Apollos, to Epaphras, to Silas, to Barnabas and so and so forth. In reality we have no real idea who the author is.<sup>1</sup> This needs to be noted from the outset.

This document was known and quoted before the end of the second century A.D., but not under what we have come to see as

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<sup>1</sup> Harold W. Attridge, "Hebrews, Epistle to the," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3 (New York NY: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 97-105.

its title “To (the) Hebrews.” That title goes back to the last quarter of the second century, and perhaps a little earlier. No one knows how this title originated, but it may go back to the fact that this work was early on considered to be a work of Paul and the editor gave it a title analogous to the other works of Paul such as “To (the) Romans.” The title may therefore have reflected the editors impression that the people addressed in this writing were Jews. There are a few places in the New Testament where the term “Hebrews” is used to describe a distinct class of Jews, or Jewish Christians. When it is used of Christians it is used to describe one group that that is opposed to those known as Hellenists (Acts 6:1; 2 Corinthians 11:22; Philippians 3:5). If we classify this document on the basis of its content then this writing is a Hellenistic document.<sup>2</sup> In other words it was written for Jews who spoke Greek and not those that spoke Hebrew, or Aramaic. I will address more the reasoning for this assumption later.

The determination of the audience to whom this writing is addressed is based upon internal evidence. Within the writing itself there is the expectation that the audience will have

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<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), pp. 3-4.

considerable familiarity with the Levitical ritual and there is a presupposed interest in this on the part of that audience. Some may object that there are indeed Gentile Christians who were thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament, that accepted it as sacred, manifested a lively interest in the details of the Mosaic tabernacle, and the Levitical offerings. The likelihood is considerably greater that we are indeed talking about Hellenistic Jews as an audience because of the emphasis and the manner of presentation. It has been proposed that the danger for Christians such as this was that they were actually in danger of committing apostasy and thus renouncing the true religion altogether (deserting the Living God - 3:12) by returning back again to Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of the author of Hebrews, deliberate disobedience was practical apostasy against God. It made no difference whether those who were disobedient were of Jewish, or Gentile by birth. Of note is the fact that the author warns his readers against falling away from the living God using the example of the Israelites who disobeyed God, rejected Moses leadership,

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<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 4-5.



and thus failed to enter the promised land. What was possible for the Israelites in the time of the exodus was still possible for Israelites in the first century. “Dead works” are things that call for repentance and cleansing on the part of Jews and Gentiles without any discrimination between them. In particular, the whole “foundation” of 6:1ff. implies the Jewish antecedents of the readers as also does the description of Christ’s death in 9:15 as those procuring “redemption of the transgressions committed under the first covenant.”<sup>4</sup> To be certain there are other ways that the context of this writing might be interpreted, but they are neither natural, nor likely. Despite the fact that there is much in this work that is useful, and speaks to both Jew and Gentile, it is still likely that it was originally intended for a Hellenistic Jewish audience that had converted to Christianity and were in danger of drifting away.

It is to be noted that the author is insistent that the Old Covenant has become antiquated and obsolete with a vigor and an insistence that would seem to be completely pointless if the readers were not especially disposed to live under that Old

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<sup>4</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 5-6.

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Covenant. It is those of Jewish leanings who would be particularly likely to accept the authority of the Scriptures (the Old Testament) if indeed their Christian faith was beginning to wear thin. This would not likely have been the case with those converted from paganism. The author of Hebrews addresses his audience with the expectation that his audience accepted that the Levitical priesthood was instituted by divine authority and might even be inclined to conclude that it was a part of the final stage of God's provision for them. The answer from pagans would have almost certainly been that they never thought the Levitical priesthood was the way that God had provided for salvation in the first place. At one time we were lacking some evidence that we now have in the Qumran scrolls (the Dead Sea scrolls), which we now know shows affinities with the Letter to the Hebrews, at least to the tendencies of that sect in their focus on the Law.<sup>5</sup>

All of the evidence leads us to the conclusion that Hellenistic Jewish converts were the most probable audience: that is that the recipients of this letter were Jewish believers in Jesus whose background was not so much the normative Judaism represented

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<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 6-7.

for us today in rabbinical (Pharisaic) texts, but that of the nonconformist Judaism of which the Essenes and the Qumran community are outstanding examples, but certainly not the only representatives.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes we forget that during the first century the Pharisees were but a small part of Judaism and that there was a rich diversity represented by a whole host of Jewish sects each with its own unique variation of belief and practice. From our New Testaments we are familiar with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but there were also the Essenes (that are familiar as the Dead Sea Scroll community), but there were also the Herodians, the Scribes, the Samaritans, the Zealots, the Therapeutae, and those that did not ascribe to any of these sects, which were in fact the majority of Jews, along with Christians (only about 10% of Jews were members of all of these sects combined). Certainly the Romans, as well as others considered Christianity to simply be one of the various sects of Judaism. Only later on would it be recognized as a separate religion, much later.

For so many of us in Churches of Christ there is the perception that on the Day of Pentecost when Peter stood up and

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<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 7-8.



preached that first sermon in Acts 2 there was the birth of the church as a new and distinct religion apart from Judaism. It should be noted however that those early adherents did not appear to see things in this way. Notice that at Acts 2:46 “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple....” Peter and John continued to worship at the temple (Acts 3:1) and James the brother of Jesus would continue to go to the temple until he was martyred there. We must recognize that the neat lines we so often draw are in reality for our convenience and so often are not based in reality. You might well imagine being one of these Jewish Christians that spoke Greek and you might struggle with what parts of the Old Law you were to keep and honor and what parts were replaced by the new order, the New Covenant. You would likely have many questions, and for at least some there would have likely been a temptation to return to the old Jewish way of doing things and perceiving things. After all, there was the temple, the liturgy, the tradition and the richness of well-worn paths of worship.


Even today there is a great tendency for people to return to the old ways. We have Seventh Day Adventists that seek to



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observe the Sabbath and we have Messianic Jews that were never Jews, but as they became Christians practice more of a hybrid version of Christianity and Judaism. There are even those within Christianity that would indicate that Christianity has taken on too much from its Greek and Roman roots and not enough from its Jewish roots. Where is the line to be drawn? What are we to take from the Old Testament and still observe today and what are we to recognize has been replaced. The Book of Hebrews, more than any other writing in the New Testament deals with this issue. Questions like, should we still worship at the Temple, offer burnt offerings for our sins and observe things like the Day of Atonement, the Sabbath, and the other festivals? Hebrews may not totally answer all of these questions, but it helps us to understand the place of so many of these things in a context that is clearly Christian and meant to help those struggling with just such questions.

It had to be really difficult to go from the grandeur and traditions of Judaism to a new faith that had none of these things. Imagine going to church on the first Sunday instead of going up to the Temple, or the Synagogue; you went to someone's house, or



down by the river. How would you feel about this? Even coming out of paganism there were traditions and a certain grandeur that this new faith will have lacked. One of the things that the Book of Hebrews does is to anchor what was missing into a present reality that offers far more grandeur and reality in terms of those things being but copies of that which was real in Jesus Christ. Hebrews seeks to set in context all that went before in relation to the reality of who Jesus is and what he has done. It clearly and powerfully teaches that the tendency to drift back toward the old and familiar traditions and practices of Judaism are not only counterproductive and retrograde they are indeed a stepping into apostasy as they rely upon that which has been replaced by a far superior sacrifice and foundation.

What does all of this mean for us today? We still struggle to understand the sacrifice of Jesus today and just like the people of the first century we so often long for meaning in ritual and tradition. Hebrews can help us to anchor our faith in an understanding that is rich and vibrant giving us the meaning that we so desperately long for and need in order to walk faithfully before God. This letter was written to those that will have



struggled greatly with this new faith. We know that those that were being addressed were Hellenistic Jews in part because the author most often quotes directly from what we know today as the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. This was the preferred translation of those Jewish people who could not read, or understand Hebrew, or Aramaic. Later on, the Jews would stop using this translation because it had become the translation of Christians. This was the translation used by the church for several centuries and even when Constantine made a gift of 50 copies of Scripture to the church the Old Testament in those copies was the Septuagint (4th century A.D.).


Some people see the fact that the Jews began using another translation of the Old Testament as a mark of the separation of Christianity from Judaism. Certainly this was one further step in this process and certainly the making of Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire also marked a further step and perhaps the most significant step. The marking of Christianity as the official state religion of the Roman Empire in A.D. 387 will certainly have been a marked point at which officially Christianity and Judaism were separated in Roman law. In so many ways

separation had already taken place and in still some ways separation was not even completed by this act.

We do not know the date that Hebrews was composed. Some date it to before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem while others date it to a later time. The discussions go back and forth. At any rate it cannot be dated later than the end of the first century. An earlier date in many ways makes more sense, but normally scholars seem to want to date it later. This seems to be more the tendency than to date things earlier despite the fact that there are at least as many good reasons to date it earlier as there are reasons to date it later. I believe that the earlier dates are better. We actually have this document quoted by Clement of Rome around A.D. 96, so this must be the latest date possible. F. F. Bruce would date this work to around A.D. 65, not long before the persecution in Rome and before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> This early date would make far more sense than a later date since the Temple would still be standing. The early date also makes more sense from the perspective that early on there would be a greater struggle for those recently converted from

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<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 20-22.




Judaism to Christianity. They would miss all the traditions, the rituals and the great connections that they had with their faith.

The destination for the readers of this letter is in fact unknown too, and as you might guess speculation is rife with a multitude of proposals. In those suggestions it should be noted that the author of this letter actually talks a great deal about the tabernacle and not about the temple. To be sure, the things that began with the tabernacle continued to be a part of temple ritual as well. It has been suggested that this letter was indeed written to Palestine and even to Jerusalem in particular. Some have proposed Alexandria in Egypt. This comes about in part due to the fact about a century after this letter was written it was being ascribed to Paul at Alexandria. The first place that Hebrews was actually known was however in Rome. Clement of Rome shows clear acquaintance with this letter when he wrote on behalf of the Roman church to the Corinthian church around A.D. 96.


Unfortunately, he gives no hint with regard to authorship.

However, the western church took a long time to accept Pauline authorship and this may be due to the fact that they knew Paul was indeed not the author. This might mean that they knew who the



true author was and therefore were resistant to accept Pauline authorship. Some have seen this as an indication that the letter was indeed first sent to Rome.

In reality, we are no closer to understanding destination of this letter, despite theory after theory and speculation upon speculation. In the same way we are no closer to authorship. This letter is accepted as canonical because of its great content. There is an extremely high christology in this book and it fills so many gaps in our understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Without this work, so many of our questions would be unanswered as to how Jesus fits into the images and faith of the Jewish people that were passed on to us as sacred Scriptures. This is a book that deepens our theology by providing understanding of the way God has been moving through all of history toward the great event of Christ's coming to earth. It gives us a great understanding of the nature of faith, the role of those great heroes of old, and challenges us to perceive how mercy and justice are connected through faith to keep us in a proper orbit before God. This is a work that challenges us to a certain form of Christian orthodoxy which sees the centrality of Christ and the




role of obedience and faith as crucial elements. This is a book rich in imagery and challenges our understanding of the very nature of faith itself. Let us immerse ourselves in this richness as we continue our walk of faith to join the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us.

# Synopsis

In this introduction to the Book of Hebrews we are challenged to recognize that there is a huge amount that we do not know regarding the authorship, destination, or even the date of this book. We are challenged in our understanding of the nature of Scripture and our perceptions of the Old Covenant and its role in salvation history. In this introduction I highlight the concern that people were drifting back toward a faith (Judaism) that they had left. We explore to some degree our understanding of exactly what Judaism will have looked like in the first century and try to explore briefly the relationship of Judaism in this early period. So many in our fellowship see the Day of Pentecost as the birth of a new and distinct religion totally separate from Judaism. The reality is more complex and how we view this separation will color our understanding of God, His church, and salvation history as a whole.

The challenge of Hebrews is to understand the nature of salvation history, God and the role of Christ within the proper framework of the Old Testament. As a new church, that is in many ways distinct and different from Judaism, there were tremendous





challenges presented as to what worship should look like, what was to be used for liturgy and what traditions were acceptable from Judaism and which are to be replaced with something new and distinctly Christian. As we explore Hebrews it will be important to recognize the one thing we are sure of is that this letter was written during the first seventy years of the history of the church. Keeping this in mind will challenge our understanding and our perceptions of what is being said. Their view of God, and salvation history, was powerfully shaped by this letter. What then does all of this mean for us today?

# Questions

1. What do you see as authoritative in your life and why?
2. How do you think a person should evaluate authority?
3. How do you think the Old Testament relates to how we should live today? Why?
4. How do you think Judaism relates to Christianity? Why?
5. Is there a difference between disobedience in ignorance, and deliberate disobedience? If so what is the difference?
6. What does it mean to you for the Old Covenant to now be obsolete? Why?
7. Why do you think people might be tempted to return to living under the Old Covenant after experiencing the New Covenant?
8. How do you think pagans would have viewed the Old Covenant in the first century?
9. Why do you think there were so many different sects in Judaism?
10. What is your perception of how Christianity and Judaism divided? Why?
11. Why do you think the apostles continued to worship at the Temple after the Day of Pentecost?
12. What do you think people today find tempting about Judaism? Why?

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13. How would you have gone about developing practices for the new church if you had been there on the Day of Pentecost? What would a typical service look like and why?
  14. How do you perceive the Old Testament as a part of salvation history and its role for us today?
  15. What is your understanding of God from the Old Testament? What challenges you and what comforts you?
  16. Where do you see Christ in the Old Testament? Why?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

As we examine the Book of Hebrews it is important to know that there is a great deal that we do not know, such as authorship, destination, or even date. It is also important for us to know that from a very early date Hebrews has served as an inspiration and a challenge to Christians in their walk of faith. This has been so much the case that Hebrews was included in our New Testament by the early Church Fathers.

## **Where is God in these words?**

As we come to this book of Hebrews we should ask ourselves where do we see God in these words? As we read and study Scripture the central point is to hear God and His message for us. Where are some places that you see God in the Book of Hebrews?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

Often we have seen education as providing things that we learn in order to pass a test. With Scripture, we should seek to ask ourselves what this means for my life and not just as some form of academic exercise? Scripture is meant to impact our soul and not just our heart, or our mind. How does your understanding of Scripture change the way you live and treat others today and tomorrow?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

Sometimes we are so general in our interpretation of Scripture that we apply it to everyone else, but fail to make the personal application and ask how does this specifically apply to me? As we go through this study of Hebrews I would challenge you to ask what is the word of God calling us to do both on an individual basis, and as a group? Specifically here in Hebrews, we are challenged to assess how we view the authority of Scripture and what role the Old Testament still has for me today? How we answer these questions will impact how we live. Please read the Book of Hebrews from beginning to end in one setting. Note how it flows and write down questions that you may have and ask those of your teacher.